

Mothers' Spanking of 3-Year-Old Children and Subsequent Risk of
Children's Aggressive Behavior

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Abstract

OBJECTIVE: The goal was to examine the association between the use of corporal punishment (CP) against 3-year-old children and subsequent aggressive behavior among those children.

METHODS: Respondents ($N = 2461$) participated in the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study (1998–2005), a population-based, birth cohort study of children born in 20 large US cities. Maternal reports of CP, children's aggressive behaviors at 3 and 5 years of age, and a host of key demographic features and potential confounding factors, including maternal child physical maltreatment, psychological maltreatment, and neglect, intimate partner aggression victimization, stress, depression, substance use, and consideration of abortion, were assessed.

RESULTS: Frequent use of CP (ie, mother's use of spanking more than twice in the previous month) when the child was 3 years of age was associated with increased risk for higher levels of child aggression when the child was 5 years of age (adjusted odds ratio: 1.49 [95% confidence interval: 1.2–1.8]; $P = .0001$), even with controlling for the child's level of aggression at age 3 and the forementioned potential confounding factors and key demographic features.

CONCLUSIONS: Despite American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations to the contrary, most parents in the United States approve of and have used CP as a form of child discipline. The current findings suggest that even minor forms of CP, such as spanking, increase risk for increased child aggressive behavior. Importantly, these findings cannot be attributed to possible confounding effects of a host of other maternal parenting risk factors.

Keywords: Premarital childbearing, child wellbeing, marriage, assortative mating, propensity score matching